DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 815 PS 011 904

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TITLE The Family and the Pre-School Child. Discussion Paper No. 2.
INSTITUTION Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne (Australia).
PUB DATE Jul 80
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented as the Mary Gutteridge Memorial Lecture to the Institute of Early Childhood Development (Melbourne, Australia, July 14, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Caregivers: Childhood Needs: *Child Rearing: Early Childhood Education: Employed Women: *Family (Sociological Unit): Fathers: Foreign Countries: Mothers: Parent Responsibility: Parent Role: *Social Attitudes: *Social Change: Social Responsibility: *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper comments on and suggests alternatives to assumptions concerning child-rearing currently held by many Australians. That family-child relationships change as societies and economies change is a fact not commonly taken for granted, but is a conclusion reached by scholars examining the history of childhood. Recently in Australia, as elsewhere, a major change has taken place: child-bearing is no longer the main function of the family. More than a million married women have entered the work field--a domain which is still geared to male expectations of full-time employment and continuous careers. Such expectations are likely to change, however, and new forms of parenthood may emerge in the near future. Under these conditions, child care providers should recognize that (1) protection of children need not be only the parents' responsibility: (2) the satisfaction of children's needs is not necessarily more important than the satisfaction of parents' needs: (3) the biological mother need not continuously and exclusively provide child care: (4) there is no one right way of being a good parent: and (5) the family is not the only institution responsible for rearing children. For both social and professional reasons, early childhood educators should prepare for the emergence of new forms of parenthood and prepare, as well, to make their expertise available as a resource to new forms of family and to the preschool child. (Author/RH)

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THE FAMILY AND THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Don Edgar and Gay Ochiltree

Paper presented by Dr. Edgar as the Mary Gutteridge Memorial Lecture to the Institute of Early Childhood Development, 14 July, 1980.

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PS011904

Institute of Family Studies Discussion Paper No.2
Melbourne, Institute of Family Studies, 1980

Edgar, Donald Ernest.
The family and the pre-school child.

(Institute of Family Studies discussion paper; no. 2)
Paper presented as the Mary Gutteridge memorial lecture to the Institute of Early Childhood Development, 14 July, 1980.
Bibliography
ISBN 0 642 89961 4

1. Children - Care and hygiene. 2. Children - Management. 3. Family. I. Ochiltree, Gay, joint author. II. Title. (Series: Australia. Institute of Family Studies. Discussion paper; no. 2)

306.8'7

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Titles in the Discussion Papers series are:

No.1 Possible directions for an Australian family policy

No.2 The family and the pre-school child

I have called this talk 'The Family and the Pre-School Child' because I feel early childhood education is seen too narrowly. Perhaps an even better title would have been 'Society and the Pre-School Child' because I want to stress the social context of child-rearing.

Our lives are so short that we tend to take for granted forms of behaviour and social relationships that are not, in fact, very old. We call things 'traditional' which have a very limited tradition, whose history in the life of humanity is miniscule. The modern nuclear family starts (to borrow David Attenborough's 'Life on Earth' terminology) at about one minute before midnight of the 'life on earth year'. The middle class traditional nuclear family, of Mum at home with two or three kids and Dad the breadwinner, barely precedes the midnight chimes.

Yet children have been cared for over millions of years in varied ways. Whilst in most societies child rearing has been tied to the female capacity for child-bearing, by no means all societies have assumed that caring for children was solely the mother's responsibility. In some societies men have looked after children while women were the hunters. In others the biological father was not the pater, the one who raises the child as a father. The sociological father may be a female or several persons; the child may rarely interact with the natural mother, but be reared by more senior members of the kinship group. Children were not the sole responsibility of the parents or, especially, of the mother alone. They were a communal responsibility, cared for by everyone and left alone only where social conditions made 'caring' difficult.

Even in the Western European tradition, historians have given us some shocks about parenting. Philippe Aries (1962) argues that maternal indifference was more characteristic than motherly love. Edward Shorter (1975) goes further and claims that the first sign of 'modern' maternal love found by Aries in 16th-17th century noble and upper bourgeois groups, did not reach the consciousness of the European masses until the early 19th century. Elizabeth Badinter (1979) in a book called Love as an Extra shows that between the Middle Ages and the French Revolution, babies were regarded as ' expendable'. They died like flies and those who lived were encumbrances - to the poor because they prevented the women from working - to the well off because they interfered with social duties. In Paris of 1780, only a thousand of the 21 000 babies born spent childhood at home - the rest were sent to wet nurses. Six thousand of the 21 000 born

were abandoned or put into the poor house. In Britain too all those who could afford it - not just the wealthy - had their babies wet-nursed. It was not until realization that national prosperity depended on the birthrate, in the era of modern colonial expansion and industrialization, that children became valuable and 'mother love' was promoted by church and state.

I make this little historical excursion not to suggest that children were not loved, or that no mothers cared, or that people were callous brutes, but rather to insist that family-child relations reflect the nature of work and social relations generally. As Shorter says

> These millions of traditional mothers were not monsters. They had merely failed the 'sacrifice' test. If they lacked an articulate sense of maternal love, it was because they were forced by material circumstances and community attitudes to subordinate infant welfare to other objectives, such as keeping the farm going or helping their husbands weave cloth (1975 : 170-1).

We have come a long way since then and society in general (not just the family) realizes more clearly how vital are the pre-school years. Yet if we think about it for a moment, we can see the signs of further change. The system of division of labor we assume (centralized work-places, separate homes, sex-role differentiation, property and capital as the key to power and influence) has made women subordinate and has had consequences for children less extreme but nevertheless unfortunate.

Work as a marketplace occupation for men takes them out of the home and away from children. It spawns suburbs, freeways, isolation of dependent wives, and is a trap for children who must relate to one person too much and another person too little. Children are no longer valued for their economic contribution to the family so child-bearing costs become a major cause of conflict, separation and divorce. On the other hand it means that people may deliberately choose to have, and when to have children, so they are likely to be both economically and psychologically better prepared for child-rearing as a couple.

A major change has taken place in Australia, as elsewhere, in recent years. Child-bearing is no longer the sole or even the main function of marriage and the family. Figures from the Australian Census of 1976 revealed that 44.1% of Australian families do not have dependent children; 32.5% of those who divorce are childless (1976 Census).

Couples are marrying later, delaying children until the second five years of marriage and, with better contraception, are restricting family size to barely replacement level. Marriage is now 'companionate' marriage, not merely 'institutional' in the sense of doing what's expected.

Thus the place of children in families is changing. Delayed until the couple is reasonably well 'set up', children arrive by deliberate choice, not accident, and have a better chance of adequate care than before. But that very delay, and the ethic of individual fulfilment that lies behind it, also reinforces the dual career nature of new family life. Women want to work and will continue to demand institutional change to make work possible.

Of course women have always worked, but 'traditionalists' like to forget that in their cries against 'maternal' deprivation and neglect, the 'attack' on motherhood. The U.N. Decade for Women Conference now in progress in Copenhagen reports that women and girls 'put in two-thirds of the world's working hours, receive a tenth of the world's income and own less than 100th of the world's property. (Age 11/7/80). In Africa, women do sixty to eighty per cent of all agricultural work, fifty per cent of all animal husbandry and one hundred per cent of the food processing. Yet new agricultural technology provides tractors for men rather than mechanical weeders that would reduce women's workload. Add to this the almost one hundred per cent load women carry for household work and childcare and you have a massive problem of chronic exhaustion.

The situation here in Australia may be less extreme but is similar. Of 1.4 million married women in the work force, over half (56.1%) work full-time, not necessarily from choice, but often from economic necessity. They carry the burden of housework as well, with few signs that husbands have been 'liberated' beyond the point of drying the dishes and reading a story to the kids at night.

Today's Age Poll claims that eighty seven per cent of men agree they should share the housework, yet only thirty five per cent agree that the male need not be the bread-winner (Age 14/7/80). And men are much less likely to believe a working mother can establish warm and secure relationships with their children. If Canadian figures are any guide, the husbands of working women still do only thirteen per cent of household chores in any case.

What, apart from men's attitudes, is society's structural response to women working? Work hours are still geared to male expectations of full-time work and continuous careers. Schools keep to rigid timetables and offer no

before or after school care. The media continue to purvey the old Women's Weekly ideal of mum as homemaker. And political attacks grow on working women supposedly taking jobs away from men. What lies behind all this is an attempt to preserve the vested interests of those for whom the social structure has 'worked', those who do not want to lose control and who use the master symbols of the age to keep mothers 'in their place'.

The signs are there, nonetheless, that these more recent traditions will change, with uncertain consequences for the family and the pre-school child. And you, as people responsible for early childhood education, should be in the vanguard, in preparation for the new forms of parenthood that may emerge.

We should recognize the fact that parenting has changed and continues to change with social conditions. We should also be aware that academic theories, as well as taken for granted 'common sense', reflect a particular time and the particular interests of certain groups. As a result social conditions may change but vested interests still persist with old theories and old ways that do increasing harm to the interests of new generations and new interest groups.

Think about some of our standard assumptions concerning family arrangements for the pre-school child. These extend beyond the early years of course but operate most forcefully when the child is young.

First, that the child is weak, vulnerable and in need of protection. Undeniable, but forms of protection do not have to be merely the parents' responsibility. The Israeli Kibbutzim offer one recent alternative that is not entirely a failure.

Second, that children have physical and emotional needs that must be met. Of course, but parents too have similar needs. Moreover, as the Rapoports point out, needs are not all of the same kind, requiring immediate and/or constant attention. They may be 'preoccupations' felt as intrinsic concerns at developmental stages; of 'requirements' laid down by experts who assert they are needed; or they may be personally felt 'needs' in particular situations. If parental needs are subordinated to those of the child we may stunt the development of both and do more harm than good. The prevailing ethos of the 1970's was child-centred and it is only recently that the needs of the parents have re-emerged, or that recognition has been given to the fact that not all parents find baby an endless joy.

Third, is a major fallacy of prescriptions for parenting that

> the opposite of harmful is what is 'right'. It is said to be harmful to remove children from loving, concerned care of parental figures and to expose young children to impersonal, unstable influences. This does not mean, as it has sometimes been taken to mean, that the biological mother (and no other) must be there (always and exclusively). This is neither true logically nor psychologically; not for the child, and not for the parent (Rapoport, 1979 : 27).

Fourth, and this follows from the previous point, is the assumption that there is one 'right' way of being a good parent. The experts, from Freud to Spock, pontificate about early childhood and what must be done if psychological disturbance is not to disturb 'normal' development. The broad shorthand of Piaget and Kohlberg describing stages of development is taken too literally and methods of treating children (down to fine details of the curriculum at pre-school or kindergarten) are laid down as hard and fast rules.

The nonsense of applying developmental psychology too rigidly lies in the failure to remember a basic premise about life : individuals are different and the social conditions, cultural values and expectations they face, make for an endless variety of 'right' ways of parenting.

The harm done by child experts is best illustrated through the fifth assumption to be questioned. The equation reads, "Parenting equals mothering". Fathers are appendages important only as providers, yet, as we have seen, women have always been providers too and men in many societies have been important to child-rearing, even, in some, being made the sociological 'mothers' of young children.

Once again, it is the potted versions of pop psychology that cause problems. The psychoanalytic writings of Bowlby and Winnicott have been wrongly applied. Bowlby's work on maternal and sensory deprivation focused on extreme situations that do not relate directly to ordinary family life (Rapoport, 1979 : 36), and though Winnicott looked at ordinary family relationships, he, too, saw the father as merely supportive. They said nothing of the father/baby role and saw the constant presence of the mother to be both crucial and natural until the age of three. Bowlby implied that parents, or rather mothers, are either good or bad, with nothing in between; while Winnicott purveyed the view that the 'ordinary good mother in being herself, would be all loving'.

Popular baby manuals spread the same ideas, with fathers being linked to the wife rather than the child, if they were mentioned at all. Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care, first published in 1946, sold over 20 million copies world wide. I recall a parent group meeting in Washington in 1973 where he had to scramble to apologize for his attitudes to women, explaining hastily that his next edition would remove sexist assumptions and terminology. His book still assumes that mother is a housewife; if she works it should be only when absolutely necessary, but he does mention that perhaps father can play a more important parental role with the young child. Old values die hard, but even the experts have to respond to social change.

The implicit reverse of the assumption "Parenting equals mothering" is that fathers have no influence on early childhood development. What a strange notion to maintain when males hold the purse-strings, dominate authority positions and dictate the most important decision-making areas both inside and outside the family. Here again, research blinkers have made father 'the forgotten parent'. Interviews about child-rearing have dealt with mothers, seldom fathers. Only recently have child studies looked at father communication, father values, father control of family processes that set the parameters for child growth. Sexist attitudes must stem from more than just female tendencies tc use pink or blue, let little girls cry but tell boys to 'be a man'. Males set limits too, fathers let sons handle tools 'too dangerous' for girls, buy toys 'too mechanical' for girls, take sons in the car or out with the boys while girls stay home with Mummy. The role model fathers provide is likely to reinforce male-female stereotypes, of males being remote, in control, firm, aggressive, unexpressive (or, less kindly, it could be said emotionally crippled).

Dr. Graeme Russel at Macquarie University found only fifteen per cent of fathers very involved in child care, but in another study of shared-role, two-parent families, found children were thriving on the close relationship with both parents.

Ironically, just as the research literature, the child-manuals and the women's magazines are beginning to catch up with the importance of fathers to early childhood, fathers seem to be going out of vogue. Worldwide, one third of all families are now headed by a woman. Partly due to a rising divorce rate (doubled in the USA and USSR in the last fifteen years), that figure reflects the fact that 'nearly half of all single women over firteen years old in the developing countries are mothers' (Age, 11/7/80). In the USA one third of women who work are the family's principal breadwinner (Rapoport, 1979 : 19).

In Australia the marital breakdown rate is nearing one quarter of all marriages and over eleven per cent of all our families have only one parent. One in every thirteen of our children spends at least part of their growing years with only one parent. More significantly perhaps, is the very high re-marriage rate after divorce, which means thousands of children have to adjust to living with a new mother or father and a new family of potentially rival siblings.

I want merely to ask, how many of our educators, our pre-schools, our politicians, our government agencies, are planning for the changes taking place? How many, instead, are crying in the dark for a return to what never was quite there and never will be there again? New forms of parenthood will place new demands on other social institutions and we need not only policies that will help remove the causes of breakdown but which also cope with the real products of change.

This brings me to the last assumption about parenting I want to mention, though there are many others. That is, that the family is the only institution responsible for rearing children. Simplistic talk of 'the family as the basic unit of society', of selfish parents, of working women neglecting their children, ignores the facts and lays blame in the wrong place. The facts are that the family is not the sole agency for the developing child. As Kenneth Keniston (1977) puts it, parents can no longer fully prepare children for life in our complex society. Nor are they expected to. Instead, the new job for parents is to act as an 'executive' choosing, finding and coordinating experts involved in the upbringing of their children. Finding health care centres, doctors, welfare advisers, kindergartens, pre-schools, child care centres, house-cleaners, babysitters, is now a major task for parents. They have to buy the 'right' clothes, nappies, furniture, car-seats, baby food, toys, educational games for their pre-schoolers. They must monitor television programs, attend parent-teacher meetings, vet the quality of playmates. And for all this they must rely on experts and services for 'proper' parenting.

Notice what is involved and what is implied for the family and the pre-school child : that parents have the executive know-how to find and use such services and the experts who provide them; that the services are available to all parents who need them; that the experts are able and willing to assist in parenting as those parents desire; that parents have the self-confidence and sense of power to demand expert help to service their needs.

Need I state the obvious? Experts like to mystify. Their jargon and higher status make many parents feel powerless and incompetent. We know that child abuse results from that sense of ignorance, incompetence and powerlessness in extreme forms. These 'child-bashers' have the same hopes, values and beliefs as other parents - they are not 'sick - but their access to help and the supports every parent nowadays needs is socially not available. Experts prefer to teach courses in colleges rather than to be used as resources upon which parents can draw. They think in terms of formally set up kindergartens and pre-schools instead of 'early childhood education' in the homes where know-how is desperately needed. They insist on entrance qualifications to courses, rather than open-entry courses on the most serious vocation of all - that of parenting. They 'deliver services' but fail to recognize the existing competence and experience of people in the community who might also be used as resource people to improve the quality of child care in this country. The Early Childhood Development Complexes are a step in the right direction. It remains to be seen how effectively they accomodate two-way traffic with input from the community as well as from the multi-disciplinary experts on the staff.

Even more obvious perhaps are the structural gaps. We have nothing comparable to Sweden's entitlement for men to share six months' paid parental (not 'maternity') leave when a child is born; or their further three months' leave any time before the child's eighth birthday; or their 12 days leave to look after children if they are ill; or the right for couples to share one job so they can share responsibility for child-rearing. We have flexitime at work, but none in schools. We have no arrangements for career advancement in part-time jobs, not even in the public service which should be setting an example. Child care and pre-school places are unevenly distributed and too few in number. The recent Knox Report found only four hundred of 2 500 children under five of working mothers were catered for in day car centres. The rest have to make private arrangements, yet the society creates the need for women to work. The NSW Children's Services Study found only one place in child care centres was available for every sixty to eighty children who needed a place in the poorer working class areas.

So how seriously do we really take the needs of early childhood? My point has been that the pre-school child should <u>not</u> be isolated in 'the family', in a home with few siblings, few extended family contacts, an isolated mother and a workaholic father. As I've suggested, the pre-school child is also a father's responsibility, a community responsibility, society's responsibility. Early childhood educators must take up the cudgels in a new way, so their expertise is available as a resource that can be used by those most in need - the family and the pre-school child.

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